***Feeling It Out:* Clark Beaumont**

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What does it take to 'make it' in art today? In 2012, *New York Magazine* proposed a number of potential new rules for success in the art world. From 'Stay on Trend' through to 'Pack Your Bags, Fly Around the World, and Hang Out With Everyone You Know From New York', the advice was brutal, and only half facetious.[1.] The art world closely resembles a European view of the globe prior to the age of exploration – partially mapped, vaguely understood, a composite of myths and stubborn beliefs. It is the constant negotiation of a culture and a market, locked in a fierce embrace. To remain a member of this nebulous and poorly differentiated space requires an act of faith. Perhaps the most dramatic of these acts is to assume the role of artist.

The professional status of the artist is tenuous, particularly for women. As Katarzyna Kosmala observed in her analysis of the career of Polish artist, Zofia Kulik, "In the lack of recognition of artistic labour as 'real' work, where the creative process is often performed in a private sphere, the status of the artist comes from drawing on a repertoire of shared myths in a construction of professional identity and communicating it to others." [2.]

In the 1980s, psychoanalyst, Barbara Sang began looking at the difficulties experienced by women artists in forming and maintaining their own creative identities. As she observed, "many of the work difficulties that women artists experience concern their inability to take themselves seriously as creators because of the complex interplay between social oppression and their own psychodynamics. It is, therefore, hard for them to develop a creative identity […] the modern woman artist has no tradition to fall back on and is therefore at a disadvantage in being able to form an artistic identity. […] Consequently, a woman may experience considerably more anxiety, ambivalence, and doubt about herself as an artist."[3.]

Clark Beaumont's exhibition, *Feeling It Out* operates in the context of this history. As a young collaborative duo, functioning as a single artistic identity, their work

implicitly acknowledges the self as a construct, but perhaps more significantly, it lays bare their experience of identity as the end product of a series of constituting acts that also (to borrow from Judith Butler) constitute "identity as a compelling illusion, an object of *belief*" [4.]

In the works they have brought together for this exhibition, they play with their identities as artists, as well as the compelling illusion of gender. Their 2012 work, *Future Predictions* asks where these two might find themselves in alternative possible futures. As old women, as sci-fi space-dwellers and as art stars, they discuss their relationship and how it should end. Staring into each other's eyes, or gently touching one another, their intimacy as friends and the potential risks of their collaboration are humorously played out as soap opera drama vignettes.

But something has changed since 2012. Clark Beaumont now exists as an art world entity. The negotiated collaborative relationship has been converted into a professional identity. In two more recent works, *Hold on to That Feeling* (2013) and *The Big Game* (2013), the two halves of Clark Beaumont appear in parallel, rather than together. Their faces and actions alternate on the screen or appear on either side of a division. In *Hold on to That Feeling*, both women assume the pose of Judd Nelson's character at the end of the 1980s film, *The Breakfast Club*. In *The Big Game*, the language they use is that of the traditionally masculine sports coach. Both works could be seen as acts of 'manning up'. Rather than borrowing the language and gestures of masculinity, however, we could also interpret Clark Beaumont as dropping the masquerade of womanliness that psychoanalytical theorist, Joan Riviere discussed in the late 1920s. As she observed, "womanliness could […] be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to revert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it..." [5.] In Riviere's view, womanliness is the identity that must be assumed if a successful woman is to avoid censure or rejection, but we know that perceived femininity has also been a millstone around a woman artist's neck.

History tells us how hard it can be for young women in the art world. In the early 1960s, British artist, Pauline Boty was an integral member of the group who would

establish Pop Art as a significant movement of its time. A great deal has been made of Clark Beaumont's use of the Internet as their primary mode of engagement with the global art world. While the current generation of young artists engages dynamically with popular media and culture, there are significant parallels with the relationship with mass culture that the pop artists of the 1960s exhibited. Pop art and contemporary practice both navigate the difficult route of sailing close enough to life to make it resonate, without coming so close as to render itself redundant.

More than just an observer of modern life, Pauline Boty's involvement in popular culture was also more direct. As a dancer on the television music show, *Ready Set Go!*, she was at the pop culture coalface. Her position within the art establishment became complicated by this, and by her work as an actress. As *Scene* magazine summarized so casually, but so forcefully, in their 1962 profile of Boty, the identity of the artist was a deeply gendered object of belief. By way of an introduction to the artist and actress, the magazine copy ran: "Actresses often have tiny brains. Painters often have large beards. Imagine a brainy actress who is also a painter and also a blonde…" [6.] (You can almost hear the addition, "Can you imagine such a thing?!" The compelling illusion of the artistic identity slamming into the illusion of femininity may never have been so graphically illustrated. Boty's 'blondness', the code for her 'womanliness', is framed as a barrier to her recognition as an artist. Clark Beaumont's costume play (their adoption and abandonment of womanliness) becomes a strategy for working through this history.

In the wake of the interrogations and creative exploitations of identity that have taken place since the late 1960s, these conflicts are well understood. Collaboration is one potent tactic for renegotiating the identity of the artist. In *Feeling It Out*, Clark Beaumont rehearse what it takes for young women to maintain the act of faith of being artists. They act out and play with masks of gender identity that might help or hinder them as they establish their careers. They become their own motivational coaches, egging on others in the process, and supplying their own appreciative applause. They predict their own futures, before others do it for them. They take a moment's climactic fist pump of triumph and turn it into an agonizingly slow act of

endurance. This drawn out gesture reveals another truth of the artist's identity: winning is only ever the beginning.

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1. *How to Make It in the Art World* -- New York Magazine. 2012. Available at: http://nymag.com/arts/art/rules/
2. Kosmala, K., 2007. The Identity Paradox? Reflections on Fluid Identity of Female Artist. *Culture and Organization*, 13(1), p.38.
3. Sang, B.E., 1989. Psychotherapy with women artists. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 16(4), p.301.
4. Butler, J., 1988. Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), p.520.
5. Riviere, J., 1929. Womanliness as a Masquerade. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 10, p.305.
6. Watling, S., 1998. *Pauline Boty, 1938-1966: the only blonde in the world*, Whitford Fine Art & Mayor Gallery, London: AM Publications.